

## **Elite Malay Polygamy: Wives, Wealth and Woes in Malaysia. *Miriam***

*Koktvedgaard Zeitzen*. New York: Berghahn, 2018. 268 pp.

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In Malaysia, a man can legally marry up to four wives, but this right is a Muslim prerogative. The actual increase in cases of polygamy is hard to establish due to the lack of statistics and the often secretive nature of the marriages themselves. Yet “the psychological impact of polygamy far outweighed its statistical presence” (3) in the lives of the elite Malay women who are the focus of this book.

Drawn into a social world where almost obsessive accounts of polygamy, both real and imagined, prevail, Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen decided to explore her interlocutors’ perceptions and experiences of polygamy and to elucidate the nature of their constant anxieties despite their success in other aspects of life. The core of her research data draws upon the narratives of 17 women who live and work in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s federal capital, or its suburban vicinity. Their life circumstances are diverse in both age (ranging from 26 to 60) and marital status

(unmarried, monogamously married, polygamously married, or divorced). Some of them grew up in polygamous households; some are or were first wives; others are second or third wives in their own marriages.

What they have in common is their established position, both financial and social, in the circle of the urban elite population. Typically they are well educated, often having degrees from abroad, and they hold professional jobs with independent incomes. They are also unanimous in their view of polygamy as a potentially oppressive and threatening situation for Malay wives. But ambivalence and ambiguity can be found throughout their narratives. Some of them contemplate entering into polygamous marriages for various reasons, while others outright reject such a possibility. The challenges that these and other women face in their life choices are gradually revealed throughout the book, which is divided into relatively short chapters with separate yet interconnected themes.

As Kocktvedgaard Zeitzen notes, one of the striking features of Malay elite polygamy is its secrecy. Husbands often secretly marry other women in other states or even in other countries to avoid applying for permission to have a polygamous marriage, which requires the consent of their first wives. Why does a woman want to enter into such a union, then, when her marriage cannot even be celebrated by

her own family and she cannot appear in public as an official (if second) wife? For some professionally successful women who have remained single by prioritizing their careers, secret polygamy may work as a “time-management strategy” (121), we are told. These women find it important to obtain a marital status and a life companion after their professional achievements but are too busy to devote themselves to full-time married life. There are also widowed or divorced women who want to secure their position in society by pursuing remarriage even in polygamy.

These decisions are made against a backdrop of social ideals that see marriage and motherhood as the defining feature of adulthood for women. The well-educated urban women in contemporary Malay society enjoy greater freedom in choosing their partners and timing their marriages compared with the past, when arranged marriages were the norm. Nevertheless, they cannot get away from conjugal and mothering ideals. Also, the strict application of Islamic laws against sex outside marriage drives some women into marriage even as second wives, as this is seen as the only legitimate way to secure a love life.

These detailed accounts of the women themselves and their friends and families make it clear that the actual or potential polygamous unions exert a

devastating effect on every party involved, as far as the women are concerned. First wives justifiably resent the fact that they must share their husbands with other women, while second wives, despite their own ambitions and strategies, endure a precarious position due to the secrecy of their marriage or, when it's open, antagonism and even abuse from first wives and their families.

From a male point of view, engaging in polygamy can be a sign of newly gained affluence and social status, partly because polygamy was traditionally practiced by the ruling class with its power and wealth. In the current social climate in Malaysia, however, men in the elite circle may also see it proudly as a distinctly Muslim practice. Indeed, the increasing prominence of polygamy, Kocktvedgaard Zeitzen argues, is closely related to concomitant changes in the conventional notion of complementary gender relations as a result of Islamization in Malaysia—changes that are detrimental to women because they face more pressure to be contained in domestic lives despite their economic success. In fact, husbands may even see their wives as too successful and try to keep them “in check as well as assert their masculinity and sexuality through polygamy as a male privilege” (101).

As Kocktvedgaard Zeitzen acknowledges, this book misses the direct voice

of men who do or do not practice polygamy. I do not see this omission as a vital defect, but the overall discussion could have benefited from even partial accounts put forward by married or unmarried men precisely because of the accelerating changes in gender relations in contemporary Malaysia. In addition, some statements are too repetitive and could have been written in a more organized manner.

On the whole, however, *Elite Malay Polygamy* successfully portrays the subtlety and complexity surrounding polygamy in contemporary urban Malaysia. I highly recommend this book to those interested in gender, Islam, and marriage practices in Southeast Asia. Polygamy is not just about love, jealousy, or sexual desire—women's fears and anxieties are situated in a much larger framework, including the state's project of promoting Malaysian modernity coupled with Muslim identity. The current social climate supporting Islamic discourse makes women reluctant to voice their views against polygamy vis-à-vis their husbands, who may bring the issue right into their married life.